

# A Commander's Guide to Hazing Prevention



**Miriam Matthews • Kimberly Curry Hall • Nelson Lim**

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE <b>2015</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-2015 to 00-00-2015</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>A Commander's Guide to Hazing Prevention</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>RAND Corporation, National Defense Research Institute, 1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA, 90407-2138</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT <b>Same as Report (SAR)</b>	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>26</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			



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— Secretary of Defense William Cohen, 1997

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**T**he military has a wealth of traditions and initiation rites aimed at building loyalty and camaraderie among its members. However, some actions conducted by and directed at service members have been unnecessarily cruel, dangerous, and even deadly. A number of recent deaths, including suicides, have put a spotlight on military hazing, causing public outcry, congressional action, and military introspection.

In response to these tragic deaths, Congress required in the 2013 National Defense Authorization Act that the services report on their policies to improve antihazing training, tracking, and response to hazing incidents. This congressional oversight effort is ongoing.

Hazing is prohibited under the Uniform Code of Military Justice, and the Department of Defense (DoD) has noted:

Treating each other with dignity and respect is essential to morale, operational readiness, and mission accomplishment. Hazing is contrary to these goals. Hazing must not be allowed to occur; and when it does, action should be prompt and effective—not only to deal with the incident, but also to prevent future occurrences. (SECDEF 1997 Policy Memorandum)

The purpose of this guide is to bring the issue to the attention of commanders to help them identify hazing so they can educate their units and respond accordingly.

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## What is hazing?

**T**he term *hazing* has different meanings for different people. Confusion persists about which actions constitute hazing and which do not. Hazing is often described as involving intentional or reckless abuse, which may be physical or psychological, that is performed or permitted by current group members against new or potential members (and sometimes against other current members). Acts of hazing have several common characteristics.



## Common characteristics

- Has no legitimate and identifiable operational purpose
- Is often performed by senior members against newcomers or subordinates
- Can be conducted as part of initiation into, affiliation with, maintenance of membership in, or change of status or position in a group
- Can occur even with victim's consent
- Can cause physical injury
- Can cause psychological injury and extreme mental stress.



## Recent examples

- “Blood pinning,” in which insignia pins are driven into a person’s flesh
- Forced consumption of food, alcohol, drugs, or other substances
- Striking, paddling, or branding
- Being made to miss meals to perform unnecessary tasks.

## Why does hazing happen?

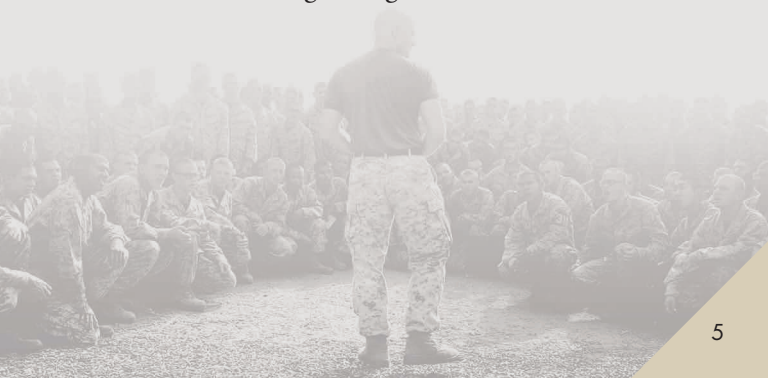
**S**ome believe that hazing increases group affinity, commitment, and cohesion among the initiates who endure these acts. Perpetrators also may haze others to prevent perceived “free-riders,” or individuals who take advantage of the benefits of group membership without contributing to the group. Another motivation may be to maintain a certain organizational or power structure within the group.



## Does hazing really encourage group bonding?

**S**upporters of hazing suggest it promotes friendships and leads to group bonding, among other supposed benefits. However, research on the effects of hazing, although mixed, generally suggests that hazing does not contribute to a greater affinity for the group and does not promote perceptions of group cohesion among those who are hazed. It may contribute to greater feelings of social dependency on the group.

The armed forces already have a series of sanctioned actions, policies, and procedures that can serve to initiate newcomers, demonstrate group commitment, and maintain group structure. Hazing is unnecessary in this regard and often has the opposite effect, damaging morale and increasing feelings of isolation.



## When is hazing most likely to occur?

- In a ritualistic or ceremonial context
- When a new member is initiated into a group
- When an existing member has a new position in the group
- To maintain affiliation with or membership in the group
- When members do not understand the characteristics and negative consequences of hazing
- When leaders are unaware, permissive, or even supportive of hazing behavior.



## How does hazing differ from bullying?

**B**ullying is meant to exclude someone from a group, while hazing is meant to bring someone into it. In another context, hazing is typically ritualized, passed down from previous generations, and ends when the target is accepted into the group. In contrast, bullying has no standard practices and no clear conclusion.



## How does hazing differ from rigorous training practices?

**T**raining tasks tend to have clear objectives that are relevant to the tasks that group members may need to perform as part of their service. In contrast, hazing activities are not clearly related to any particular skills or abilities that are requisite to military service.



## How much is known about military hazing?

**L**ittle research has been done on hazing in the U.S. military, but some studies have looked at hazing at the nation's military service academies. Common themes of this literature are that students do not understand the definition of hazing and have trouble distinguishing between hazing and the rigorous training and indoctrination they undergo.

Similar research that focused on the militaries of other nations suggested that difficulty in identifying and describing hazing is an issue in armed services across the globe.

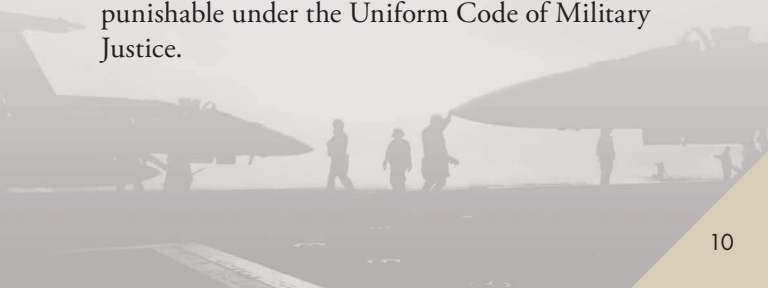


## Why does hazing go unreported?

**P**eople do not report hazing in part because they are confused about what behaviors are considered hazing. For one thing, each service has had different definitions of hazing over time. For another, acts of hazing become ritualized and are passed down over generations, so it is not always clear which rites are and which are not sanctioned. This confusion makes it hard to discern when an act has crossed the line.

Among other reasons that hazing is not reported

- Individuals fear repercussions from their peers or even leadership for reporting hazing.
- Participants think taking part in hazing shows their commitment to the group and will gain them the benefits of membership.
- It may not be common knowledge that hazing is punishable under the Uniform Code of Military Justice.





## Why is it important for commanders to report hazing?

**T**he military historically has not tracked hazing incidents in a consistent, methodical way, but these data are important to understanding the extent to which hazing is a problem in the armed forces and where it is most prevalent. Accurate, detailed reporting of hazing incidents can help determine the scope of military hazing and go a long way toward informing prevention efforts.



## How can my unit and I prevent hazing?

**A**s a commander, it is important for you to show clear and consistent commitment and support for antihazing initiatives, including dealing with hazing swiftly and visibly. It is also crucial that individuals under your command learn to recognize hazing and how to respond to it.

Antihazing training methods should be comprehensive, continuous, and interactive. Active engagement through instructor-led discussion or classroom activities is particularly important because it increases information retention. Training content should be sequential and target three areas:

- increasing knowledge
- influencing attitudes and perceptions
- changing or developing behaviors and skills.

## Increasing knowledge

Antihazing training should

- provide the DoD definition of hazing, as well as a description and recent examples
- use examples and other strategies to help individuals differentiate hazing from sanctioned activities, such as extra military instruction to correct performance issues
- describe the legal, physical, and psychological consequences of hazing
- communicate antihazing policies in a clear and concise way, including how hazing is disciplined
- explain available reporting methods and make clear the duty of all (e.g., bystanders, leaders, participants) to report acts of hazing
- teach leaders how to identify and address hazing.

## Influencing attitudes and perceptions

**M**ilitary leaders should use training to correct misperceptions about hazing, such as its effects on group cohesion, its prevalence, and the level of support for hazing in both the unit and the services in general. This discussion requires care and consideration of individuals' backgrounds and beliefs; if the people being trained have participated in hazing in the past, they will likely become defensive and resistant if approached carelessly.

Conversely, training can engender feelings of personal responsibility if it changes a trainee's perceptions of behavioral control. This is especially worthwhile as a way to promote action among bystanders who may not feel confident about or responsible for preventing hazing or punishing offenders.



## Changing or developing behaviors and skills

At the core of antihazing training are two primary goals

- promoting ethical decisionmaking and critical thinking, so individuals are able to address hazing before, during, and after it has occurred
- developing leadership skills to give victims, bystanders, and others the confidence to help prevent, intervene in, and report hazing.



## What else should commanders consider for antihazing efforts?

**A**ntihazing efforts can be implemented at the personal level and the organizational level, and a comprehensive antihazing initiative requires both. In addition, the frequency of and approach to antihazing education and training should be uniform to ensure consistent messaging and to improve the armed forces' ability to assess the quality and effectiveness of the program overall.

### At the individual level

Antihazing programs should

- be comprehensive and continuous
- include a training sequence of increasing knowledge, influencing attitudes and perceptions, and changing or developing behaviors and skills
- teach leaders how to identify and address hazing
- incorporate active learning techniques (e.g., discussion, role-playing).

## **At the organizational level**

The DoD and the armed forces are already working to update antihazing policies and make them consistent across the services. RAND recommends including certain elements in these ongoing efforts. Commanders should incorporate several of these elements as part of their own antihazing efforts, including the following

- Communicate antihazing policies and consequences broadly.
- Hold leaders accountable for hazing prevention and swift enforcement of punishment for hazing.
- Ensure that options for reporting anonymously and outside the chain of command exist.
- Assign an individual or office to provide oversight.

This guidebook is based on research that is fully documented in *Hazing in the U.S. Armed Forces: Recommendations for Hazing Prevention Policy and Practice* (by Kirsten M. Keller, Miriam Matthews, Kimberly Curry Hall, William Marcellino, Jacqueline A. Mauro, and Nelson Lim, RR-941-OSD, RAND Corporation, 2015, available online at [www.rand.org/t/rr941](http://www.rand.org/t/rr941)). The work was sponsored by the Office of Diversity Management and Equal Opportunity within the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness and was conducted within the Forces and Resources Policy Center of the RAND National Defense Research Institute, a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant Commands, the Navy, the Marine Corps, the defense agencies, and the defense Intelligence Community under contract number W91WAW-12-C-0030.

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